

The Justice of the Servant  
Matthew 12:15-21

“No justice, no peace.” We’ve heard this chant for years, as crowds have gathered to protest the deaths of people at the hands of the police. And instead of waiting for juries to decide the facts and for judges to impose legal sentences for lawbreakers, crowds in America’s largest cities have become increasingly violent. Even after Derek Chauvin was convicted this week of murdering George Floyd, an angry mob in Minneapolis responded by trying to break the windows on a semi-truck, while night after night crowds in Portland continue to festoon their city in spray-paint and break windows of downtown businesses, whose owners now cry for justice for a different reason.

Of course, the crowds that came to Jesus some 2000 years ago were seeking justice as well. They were tired of bowing down to the Romans whose legions had occupied their country. They were tired of being submissive to foreign oppressors who didn’t share their faith or their values. They longed for freedom, and for a Messiah who would help them seize it.

And you know, the people of Isaiah’s time, some 700 years before Christ, had the same sorts of problems. Over the course of his long ministry, the Assyrian empire conquered the Kingdom of Israel and then overran the Kingdom of Judah, leaving only the city of Jerusalem unvanquished. And although the Assyrians eventually abandoned their siege, Isaiah also prophesied the city’s eventual downfall, correctly predicting its destruction at the hands of the Babylonians some 100 years later.

Yes, for centuries people have been complaining about the unjust governments, even while they’ve continued to look to the same sorts of governments to make justice possible. If we could just have a better king, a more understanding judge, a wiser governor or president, if only people like us could be in charge, we imagine that everything would be fine, that justice would somehow be guaranteed. But the history of the world tells a different story, as good kings and governors either fall into corruption and disgrace, or are followed by corrupt or brutal successors, as empires rise and fall, replacing one another in a seemingly endless cycle of violence. No, looking to powerful people to guarantee justice has always been a fool’s errand.

But if human governments are unable to construct a perfect human society, neither can so many other things in which we modern Americans place our trust. Yes, we applaud our researchers for developing effective vaccines for this new coronavirus in record time, even as we wonder if the same sorts of scientists might have been responsible for somehow modifying and releasing that virus from a Chinese lab. We imagine that higher education is the key to prosperity, even as a generation of students has graduated with useless degrees and mountains of debt. We have told ourselves that heartfelt affection is all that matters in relationships, even while our families fall apart when people ignore their covenant commitments to chase after fleeting feelings. We imagine that we can determine our own truth and construct our own personal reality, and then wonder why our society can no longer agree to disagree. We flock to larger and larger cities in search of wealth and opportunity, only to find skyrocketing rents, rampant crime, and yes, violent mobs crying out for the justice no one seems to be able to provide.

But we aren’t alone in our disappointment. Many of the people of Isaiah’s time had abandoned their allegiance to God in order to worship false idols, embracing the same gods that their pagan oppressors served. But as the Babylonians would eventually succeed the Assyrians, and as the Persians would eventually succeed the Babylonians, and as the Greeks would eventually succeed the Persians, none of these wars of conquest were able to bring lasting peace, just as none of losers’ false gods were

able to protect any of them from being overthrown. Indeed, no object or idea or system created by human beings can possibly keep other human beings from destroying them – or us.

That's why God challenged, really taunted the false idols of Isaiah's time the way He did: "Do something – something good or evil. Tell about what's going to happen in the future. Oh, you can't? You are of no account, and your work amounts to nothing."

And we could issue the same sorts of taunts to the idols of today, pointing out the numerous failures of the gods people continue to embrace. Where's the bliss promised by alcohol and drugs? Where's the end to poverty promised by the New Deal and the Great Society? Where's the happiness promised by Romanticism and the Sexual Revolution? Where's the fulfillment promised by materialism and financial wealth? No, all our modern false gods keep moving the goalposts, insisting that only a little more devotion to them will yield the results we want, even while they keep disappointing us with their failures, time after time.

And that's because only the One True God determines the rise and fall of kings and kingdoms. Only the One True God is in control of all the events of human history. That's why Isaiah could predict the coming of Cyrus the Persian, the one who he said would come from the north to conquer the other rulers of his time. That's why Isaiah could predict the coming of Jesus, the Servant of God Who would eventually bring the justice that all of us so deeply desire.

And that's why only Jesus is able to put down everyone and everything that continues to oppress His people. For only He is a perfectly sinless person, unlike the many venal and corrupt politicians we know only too well. In fact, unlike even the best of human rulers, Jesus isn't limited in any way. No, as verse 18 says, He is filled with the Spirit of the Lord – and that's because He is the Son of God. He alone can bring perfect justice because only He combines absolute power with comprehensive knowledge.

And this is also why only He can bring justice to all groups of people at the same time. For let's face it – in our zero-sum world, what one group wants is usually going to make some other folks upset. If the urban mobs get their way and police departments are defunded, well, the businessmen and property owners of those same cities won't be so happy. The husband who wants a divorce in order to marry a younger woman is unlikely to please the wife and children he is so ready to abandon. Human courts are definitionally filled with just as many losers as winners, and the losers always think they got a raw deal. As Tim DuBois wrote and Jerry Reed sang, "She got the gold mine, but I got the shaft. They split it right down the middle, and then they gave her the better half."

No, no one likes to be a loser. And it's the attempt to avoid being on the losing end of any struggle that has poisoned so much of our modern political climate, encouraging everyone to do whatever it takes to get the best of our opponents. Sometimes we even fall into hatred of those who disagree with us, in spite of our common citizenship, in spite of the fact that we are all made in the image of God.

But that's not the way Jesus operates. Instead, verse 18 makes it clear that the coming Messiah would proclaim justice even to the Gentiles, even to those who weren't part of God's Old Testament people. But this wasn't a prediction that Jesus would pound the undeserving unbelievers into submission, giving them the sort of justice that comes at you good and hard, right between the eyes. No, verse 21 goes on to say that the Gentiles would trust in this justice, waiting expectantly for it. For the good news is that the justice of Jesus Christ is for everyone, no matter what group we may belong to, no matter how rebellious or sinful we may have been.

And only Jesus can bring such true and complete justice to everyone because of the method He uses to produce it, because of the manner in which He provides it. Now, remember, the people of Jesus' time expected their Messiah to emulate Cyrus the Persian, the one whom Isaiah said would come from

the north to destroy all those who stood in opposition to him, the one who would give the wicked Babylonians what was coming to them, trampling them down the way a potter treads clay. Because of prophecies like this, the Jerusalem crowd expected Jesus to use His miraculous powers to do the same sort of thing, raising up a rebellion against the Romans, throwing them out of the Promised Land and ruling over a worldly kingdom from David's capital city of Jerusalem. And maybe you long for a human governor or president who will lead the same sort of fight against those you consider to be your enemies too.

But that's just not Jesus' way. For in verse 19, Matthew quotes from Isaiah's prophecy, pointing out that Jesus would act in a self-effacing way, not making a public outcry in the streets, not beating His own drum or tooting His own horn. And that's exactly the way Jesus behaved. Far from trying to make a big splash and attract a lot of attention, verse 16 notes that He often did His miracles of healing in private, urging people not to make too much of a fuss about it.

No, Jesus isn't the kind of leader like Nebuchanezzar or Cyrus who pushes other people around. No, in verse 20 Matthew quotes Isaiah as saying that Jesus wouldn't even exert enough force to break a reed that had already been bent by the wind – He wouldn't even pinch out a candle's barely glowing wick. No, Isaiah said Jesus would somehow bring perfect justice to everyone in a humble way, a gentle way. Somehow, instead of compelling all His enemies to act the way He wants them to, He changes their hearts and minds, making them eager to trust in His name and obey His law.

And of course we know how Jesus did all of this, don't we? For instead of coming into the world He created in a blaze of glory, He was born to poor, powerless parents and spent His first night in a stable. Instead of blasting His enemies with the consuming fire from Heaven that we all deserve, He absorbed all the wrath of God into Himself, taking all the sins of all His people to the cross. Instead of rounding up and executing all of the traitors who have rebelled against His righteous rule, He has accomplished perfect justice by dying in the place of all who trust in Him, for Jew and Gentile, for black and white, for Republican and Democrat alike. Yes, He has brought perfect justice to everyone by laying down His life so that even undeserving sinners like us might be saved.

And Isaiah sums all of this up in the title he uses for Jesus, a title Matthew mentions in verse 18: "Behold My Servant." For in spite of His unimaginable power and glory, the Son of God chose to be merely the Servant of God, humbling Himself to do His Father's perfect will, satisfying His Father's perfect justice at the price of His own blood. That's the amazing truth – that Jesus would lay aside His glory and choose to become a servant, giving up everything He is and everything He has so that those He loves might be forgiven of our sins, so that those who trust in Him might be made righteous in the sight of God, so that those who love Him might be adopted into God's very own family.

And if we want to follow Him, if we want to do justice the way He does, then we must love as He loves, humbly serving even those we might consider to be ungrateful and undeserving. For there's no other way to walk with Jesus than to walk the way of the cross.